

## Two Guys Dressed In the Blues

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Joe Formabulo for The New York Times

Willie Nelson Sings the Blues Mr. Nelson performed with the jazz trumpeter Wynton Marsalis Friday night at the Allen Room.

## Just a Couple of Guys Dressed in the Blues

Willie Nelson was halfway through a flinty and casually gripping guitar solo on "Rainy Day Blues" when everything clicked into place. It was his fifth song at the Allen Room on Friday night, and the bright young rhythm section onstage was finally locking in. At Mr. Nelson's right elbow Wynton Marsalis shot the saxophonist Walter Blanding Jr. a knowing glance, one eyebrow appreciatively raised. After a somewhat tentative start, the concert hit its groove.

Mr. Nelson was performing with Mr. Marsalis's quintet in the first of four sold-out shows organized by Jazz at Lincoln Center,

under the heading "Willie Nelson Sings the Blues." (It was a sequel to a brief encounter several years ago when he played on a gala for the organization.) Because the blues are as much of a bedrock for Mr. Nelson as they are for Mr. Marsalis, this held the simple promise of a meeting on common ground. All Mr. Nelson brought with him was an acoustic guitar and a trusted wingman, the harmonica player Mickey Raphael.

He also brought his intractable style, which posed more of a challenge to the other musicians than any clash of genre. His conversational way with rhythm, in particular, momentarily threw the band. During a series of stop-time breaks on "Basin Street Blues," the

second tune, Mr. Nelson's phrasing was almost perversely free of tempo, rustling like a breeze. In much the same way, he seemed to regard the jump-blues thrust of "Caldonia" as merely a recommendation, something to heed at will.

And that, as his fans might say, is typical Willie. Though he has had one of the broadest careers in American music, Mr. Nelson is no chameleon. His colors are the same in any setting; and the calm, comforting tone of his voice rarely warps or strains to fit a fashion. "Rainy Day Blues" happens to be the first track on his current album, "Songbird" (Lost Highway), which features anthems by the

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likes of Leonard Cohen and Fleetwood Mac. Though not on his usual turf, Mr. Nelson sounds entirely unfazed, and unchanged.

Because that was true on Friday too, the onus of adapting rested on the pianist Dan Nimmer, the bassist Carlos Henriquez and the drummer Ali Jackson. They handled it professionally, attuning themselves to Mr. Nelson's drifting cadences with an increasing understanding and command.

There was no such learning curve for Mr. Marsalis, who played his trumpet with terse, unforced authority right out of the gate. He tinkered a fair amount with timbre throughout the concert, using an array of different mutes and techniques. He was pushing toward a vocal quality, singing through his horn.

Mr. Marsalis also sang with his voice, on a version of "Ain't Nobody's Business" that quickly turned into a buddy duet. "I hear you," Mr. Nelson said sympathetically during a roguish verse by Mr. Marsalis. It was a moment evocative of the banter between Jack Teagarden and Louis Armstrong. And it set a playful tone for what followed, including renditions of "My Bucket's Got a Hole In It" and "Down by the Riverside."

But the concert's most transcendent moments conveyed more of a quiet ache. They were "Stardust" and "Georgia on My Mind," a pair of Hoagy Carmichael standards that Mr. Nelson long ago personalized. He sang them both with a forthright intimacy, as if telling a cherished bedtime story. And the band was right there with him, emphasizing how the blues are as much a feeling as a form.

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